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DEPARTMENT OF STATE
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THE HUNGARIAN COUP d'ETAT

of 15 October 1944

Description

Reconstruction, analysis, and background of the events which have led to the current crisis in Hungary.

16 October 1944

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SUMMARY

As a result of the Russian invasion of Hungary, Admiral Horthy's conservative regime, in a final effort to achieve "disentanglement" from its previous German policy, attempted to capitulate to the Allies. Determined to prevent the defection of its most valuable remaining satellite, Germany has installed a new government in Budapest under the extremist Arrow Cross chieftain, Szalási.

The events of 14-15 October constitute another chapter in the rivalry between the traditional Hungarian ruling group and the Hungarian Nazis. Current developments also represent the most recent stage in Hungary's shifting policy of collaboration with Berlin. This collaboration, which became complete at the time of Czechoslovakia's dismemberment, began to decrease after the Hungarian military disaster at Voronezh in February 1943. With the German coup of 19 March 1944 the policy of "total belligerent collaboration" was resumed and had continued until the present crisis.

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I. EVENTS OF OCTOBER 1944

On 11 October the Russian army invading Hungary reached Kecskemet and stood fifty-seven miles from Budapest. While the traditional ruling group[1] about the Regent, Admiral Horthy, made a final effort to achieve "disentanglement" by announcing the abrogation of the German alliance, the Hungarian Nazis, with German aid, have succeeded in setting up a new, if ephemeral, regime.

Repeated German warnings to Hungary against yielding to the Soviets have indicated that the Lakatos cabinet, originally constituted as a "disentanglement government," was already taking steps to terminate the unequal struggle. According to a reliable source, Admiral Horthy early in October wrote a personal letter to Marshal Stalin and despatched a Hungarian surrender delegation to Moscow.

Simultaneously Budapest was using its diplomatic agents to advise its denationalized dissident ministers in neutral capitals as to what measures should be taken to obtain conditional surrender terms. László Homonnay, son of the former Chief Mayor of Budapest, arrived in Stockholm ostensibly to join the official Hungarian legation,

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1. The phrase "ruling group" in the case of Hungary implies a combination of elements----land-owning gentry, army officers, a small number of industrialists, the petty bureaucracy, and others---- which have traditionally constituted the governing classes under the Hungarian constitution.

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but actually for the purpose of serving as a liaison agent between Foreign Minister Gen. Hennyey and the dissident Ullein-Reviczky. According to Hungarian circles in Stockholm, Homonnay conveyed a message to Ullein-Reviczky from Hennyey to the effect that Hungary would be willing to switch to the Allied side if given the assurance that at least a part of her territory would be assigned to Anglo-American occupying forces. A few days later Homonnay resigned from the Hungarian legation. Marossy, heretofore the pro-Nazi Hungarian minister to Finland also came to Stockholm. He sought out Ullein-Reviczky and offered to deliver to Horthy any message Ullein-Reviczky might wish to send. Accepting the offer, Ullein advised Horthy to surrender immediately and to broadcast the orders over the radio in person if his pro-German entourage should decline to transmit his orders to the Army. Marossy left Stockholm for Budapest on 5 October, having informed Ullein-Reviczky that he would recommend the latter's appointment as Prime Minister with orders to negotiate the surrender in Stockholm.

In Budapest there were indications of increasing German pressure on the Lakatos government. Bonczos and Rakovszky, conservatives who had entered the cabinet to replace the exposed pro-Nazis, Jaross and Antal, submitted their resignations. Almost simultaneously the German radio announced the formation of an "Association of Hungarian Deputies"

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with the collaborationist and former Minister of Industry Szász, as chairman, and an Arrow Cross leader, Szőllősi (not to be confused with Szalasi, the Chief of the Arrow Cross), and the Imrédyst publicist, Rajniss, as vice chairmen. Since Hungarian deputies already had an "association"--the parliament itself--the formation of the new organization, especially in view of its leadership, may be received as a sign of German anxiety to provide for a successor to the Hungarian parliament, should the latter body slip from their control. The last-minute efforts of the conservative elements to obtain favorable surrender terms on the one hand, and the formation of the new Association on the other, were symptoms of an acute stage in the long-standing rift between the Horthy régime and its Nazi-minded opposition.

Over the weekend of 14-15 October developments in Budapest reached a climax. Sunday morning (15 October) a proclamation was broadcast by or for Regent Horthy, informing the population that the Reich had failed to show "the loyalty of an ally" and that the preliminary phase of negotiations for an armistice had opened. Then followed a statement by Gen. Vörös, the Chief of Staff, warning that there should be no letup in the fighting until further notice. This contradicted Horthy's previous assertion that hostilities were already being stopped. Almost simultaneously the German-controlled Bratislava Radio, referring to the crisis in Hungary, characterized Regent Horthy as a "traitor". In the evening the Budapest Radio was heard broad-

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casting a proclamation by Maj. Szálasi, leader of the Arrow Cross party, announcing that he had taken Horthy's place as Regent, and that Béla Imrédy had replaced Gen. Lakatos as Prime Minister. Horthy, the proclamation informed the population, had been deceived; by his traitorous entourage since 1936 he had consistently followed the wrong course against Szálasi's advice. Faced with a national crisis, Szálasi decided to choose "justice and life", in preference to "constitution and law."

Szálasi's Arrow Cross party constitutes the extreme radical wing of Hungarian National Socialists. Szálasi is an ex-officer who was at one time confined in an insane asylum and whose psychological instability is well-attested. He was imprisoned for his political activity until after the Second Vienna Award (31 August 1940), when he was released as a concession to Germany. Since the German coup of last 19 March, the Germans seem to have been holding Szálasi's Arrow Cross followers in reserve for a final emergency.

Béla Imrédy, a former premier, has been the leader of Hungary's "moderate" or "gentlemen Nazis" since 1939. Following Szálasi's proclamation in which Imrédy was announced as premier, Imrédy broadcast an appeal to the Army to continue the struggle. When the list of the new cabinet was published, however, Imrédy's name was not included. According to this list Szálasi had become both "acting Regent and Prime Minister." This fact may be accounted for by the long-standing rivalry between Szálasi and Imrédy for leadership of

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the Hungarian Nazi movement. For the past six years Szálasi's followers have been deriding Imrédy because of his Jewish ancestry.

The new cabinet is dominated by seven members of Szálasi's Arrow Cross, who are reinforced by three army men of pro-Nazi sympathies. Imrédy's Regeneration Party is represented by Ferenc Rajniss (who is also vice chairman of the "Association of Hungarian Deputies"). Count Fidél Pálffy represents his Hungarian National Socialist Party. Three additional portfolios are held by conservative members of former cabinets, Reményi-Schneller, Szász and Jurcsek. The revolutionary Hungarian government, therefore, represents an amalgamation of all Hungarian Nazi elements plus the unregenerate collaborationist wing of the old ruling group, with leadership vested in the radical Nazi Arrow Cross Party. With this new cabinet, and with the "Association of Hungarian Deputies" to substitute for the legal parliament, the Germans are apparently seeking to maintain the appearance of constitutional continuity, first on Hungarian, and perhaps later on German soil.

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II. BACKGROUND OF THE REVOLT

The present Hungarian revolution has its roots in the long-standing political schism in Hungary between the traditional ruling group and the extremist forces whose growth was directly related to the rise of National Socialism in Germany. The first Hungarian Nazi Party was formed in 1932. From that time until the Munich crisis, the Hungarian Nazis constituted a revolutionary movement, the aim of which was to overthrow the ruling group and to seize control of the government. That they did not succeed was due to rivalry among the would-be Führers, which was skillfully exploited by the conservative régime.

Caught between the increasing pressure of the Reich on Hungarian frontiers and the formidable presence of the indigenous Nazis within the country, the ruling group after 1933 veered more and more toward the right, finally adopting the most popular and least costly plank of the Nazi platform, political racism. Concomitantly, however, Hungarian National Socialism received powerful support from defectionist conservatives, led by Béla Imrédy, an ex-premier and leader in the ruling group itself. Principally by drawing closer to Italy, the conservatives succeeded in maintaining a somewhat aloof attitude toward the Reich; but after the Anschluss the continuation of this policy became increasingly difficult. The dismemberment of Czechoslovakia presented an opportunity for territorial gain, and the Hungarian Government succumbed to a policy of active collaboration

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with Germany. The policy of survival has passed through four successive periods and is now entering the fifth.

The first period of collaboration began with Hungary's adherence to the Anti-Comintern Pact in January 1939 and ended with Prime Minister Teleki's suicide on 3 April 1941. During this period the ruling group was pursuing a policy of "pacific collaboration" with Germany and Italy by aligning Hungary with the anti-status-quo camp and by carrying out a policy of internal nazification. The purpose of this "pacific collaboration" was the revision of the Trianon frontiers with German-Italian aid but without active belligerency. The failure of this policy was signalized by Count Teleki's spectacular suicide on the eve of the Yugoslav campaign.

The second period of collaboration began with the concerted German-Hungarian attack on Yugoslavia on 9 April 1941 and ended with the great Hungarian military defeat at Voronezh in January and February 1943. During this period the ruling group was pursuing a policy of "total belligerent collaboration" with the Axis by participating in the German campaigns against Yugoslavia and Russia and by declaring war on Great Britain and the United States. The purpose of this "total belligerent collaboration" is believed to have been the post-war establishment of Hungarian sovereignty over the entire Carpathian basin, as a reward from Germany for services rendered in the creation of the New Order. The failure of this policy became increasingly apparent with the beginning of the German retreat in Russia.

The third period, from February 1943 to the German occupation of Hungary on 19 March 1944, was marked by the Government's effort to reduce its commitment to the German war effort. During this period the ruling group was pursuing a policy of "partial belligerent collaboration" with Germany by attempting to keep the Hungarian troops in Russia behind the fast-receding fighting front and by making repeated demands for the return of all Hungarian military units to Hungary. The purpose of this "partial belligerent collaboration" was the safeguarding of territorial gains already made, the demonstration of Hungarian "good will" toward the United Nations, and probably the eventual defection of Budapest from the German alliance. This policy, too, failed, and its collapse was marked by the German occupation of Hungary on 19 March 1944.

The fourth period of collaboration began with the German coup of 19 March 1944, when the policy of "total belligerent collaboration" of former days was resumed by a purged ruling group, consisting of conservative and Imrédyist elements, this time under strict German supervision. During the early part of this period there was no independent Hungarian policy. The Rumanian surrender and the subsequent Russian crossing of the Carpathians to Transylvania and then to Hungarian soil determined the Hungarian conservatives to seek a way out of the war. First the Imrédyists were dropped from the cabinet, then the quisling Sztojay was replaced as Premier by the non-political Gen. Lakatos. Peace feelers were extended toward the western allies and

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later toward Moscow. It became obvious that Hungarian policy, as represented by the regime's tacit acceptance of German suzerainty, was as much a failure as any of the three preceding types of collaboration pursued since 1939. At this point the schism between the Hungarian conservatives and their Nazi opponents entered its present acute stage.

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